

Radical Middle Way Transcripts

Habib Ali al-Jifri during The Radical Middle Way Launch

Introduction

We thank Allah that He has chosen us to be among the people of 'there is none worthy of worship but Allah' in this blessed age. And I say blessed because the blessedness of time is in accordance to what Allah inspires and makes flow into the heart of the believer at that time.

The Prophet of Allah peace be upon him said that at the end of time, the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary would descend upon the Earth and that he would find amongst my nation, men who would stand with him like his disciples stood with him, i.e. in the certainty they have in Allah and truthfulness that marks their relationship with Allah.

Sufficient it is as a blessing of our time that it has begun with the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, as he, peace be upon him said, "I was sent and I and the Hour are like this (and he places his two fingers by one another, i.e. very close near).

Before us now, in these days, is a great opportunity, which I believe was not granted to the generations before us, but the problem is that we have not been mindful. This opportunity is unprecedented in that the whole world, and I emphasize the whole world, is willing to listen to the message of Islam. It is true, that a big part of that concern is due to negative causes, but the end result is that the whole world listens carefully to you, so be mindful of what you say, be mindful of what you say, be mindful of what you say. Understand that we are people with a mission.

The Mission

Firstly, it is appropriate that we understand that Islam does not stand accused such that we must stand to defend it. Islam is the religion of Allah, to which all of creation needs to be connected.

But what accusations of today, are directed to us? The true accusation directed to us is of a different nature, differing from what the media transmits. The true accusation which we must fear and worry about is that which says, 'we have not delivered the message of Allah to His creation in the correct way.'

For this, it is upon us today to have a role. I desire for all of those present or listening or watching to feel that he or she has a mission that, despite all circumstance, he or she should never forgets that. The more difficult the circumstances become, the more the bite and constriction of time tighten around us, the more it is a message to us that we have a mission. Even those who harm us today. It is as if they are telling us, 'I am seeking my revenge, for you have not fulfilled your duties. In your possession is a precious jewel, something amazing, why have you not delivered it to us?' Thus, these days are days of rolling up the sleeves and working, in this country and in the East and the West; you are people with a mission.

The origin of this mission is that Allah has created us solely to actualize our slavehood to Allah, to live a life in worship to Him. He has also made us responsible with a task and that is to cultivate this world, and we are thus in need for seriousness in our lives.

The Attribute of Balance

And it is not appropriate, for us as an ummah, to attempt this mission without being characterized with the attribute with which Allah has described us in His Book, "and We also made you a balanced nation to bear witness upon mankind and that the Messenger can bear witness upon you." Therefore, the description of the ummah is that it is balanced (ummatun wasat). And if we do not understand this and do not actualize it, it becomes difficult for the ummah to fulfil its mission in this life. For this reason, we, on this night, [will] speak about balance (al-wasatiyya).

Some ask, 'Why is there are so much talk after the incident (9/11), which was followed by other incidents, about the middle way, balance, tolerance, forgiveness, good character, courtesy, about the beauty of Islam? Is this because the world today is pressuring us to?' This is a justified question.

But the answer must in turn be with two questions. The first question is, 'Are we, in reality, characterized by Allah as being balanced (wasat)?' If the answer is 'yes,' then there is another question. 'Are we, today, continuing to be a balanced nation?' Are we today, a balanced nation? This is a question directed to you. Are we a balanced nation? Do we still live the balance of Islam that allows us to be witnesses upon the other nations? The question is directed to you. Are we enjoying and reaping the benefits of the balance which Allah puts forth in His Book?

[Audience says] 'No'

Why not?

[Audience says] 'Yes'

If yes, then why yes?

For this, we must talk about the middle way.

The Meaning of Wasat in the Arabic Language

The real question is what does the middle way mean? I will speak first about the vocabulary of the Arabic language, for in the Arabic language, the wasat is used for many meanings.

In the language of the Arabs, the word wasat is used to describe the thing that is equidistant from both its outer ends, as told by the author of the Misbah. Also, the Arabs use the word tawsit which is taken from wasat for cutting a thing in two equal halves. If we can be a balanced nation, then we will help all of humanity to decide with which group they seek to be associated of good and evil. Does the love of good outdo the love evil, mercy over harshness, justice over injustice, courtesy over harm?

Also, it means something which has a parameter encircling it. Imam al-Nasafi (d. 642/1245) says that corruption always begins eating at the parameters of things, and if we are at the middle, then the deterioration which is a consequence of corruption, immorality, and the loss of principles will not begin with us (and we will be the last to be affected). These are among the meanings of 'the middle way.'

The author of al-Mukhtar said that from the meanings of the word tawsit is heart of a thing. Imam al-Qurtubi (671/1272) said in his tafsir, "and for this reason the description of the ummah as balanced is among the verses the ordain the shift of the prayer direction (qibla) from Jerusalem to the Kaaba, because the Kaaba is located in the exact middle of the world (the umbilicus mundus)" In this is a hint that as the qibla turns to the middle of the world, so we transform our lives into one of balanced behaviour.

These are some of the meanings for the word wasat and tawsit. They said there is also tawassut which comes from seeking to gather two opposing views or perspectives. Imam al-Tabari (d. 310/923) may Allah have mercy on him, in his tafsir that this means to be the middle between the Prophet and the nations, i.e. you carry the light of the Prophet to those who have yet to receive it. So the word is in the sense of a middle man or a means to an end. It is appropriate here to pause briefly with ourselves. Are we means between our Prophet and the people, or are we a barrier between him and them.

And the meaning of tawassut also has meaning regarding truth and giving judgement. The exegetes say about the verse, "and their most balanced one said" (qala awsatuhum), i.e. their most correct in judgement. The indication here is that we likewise should be an ummah that searches for the truth, not the ego and whim and the desires. Wherever the truth is, [this ummah] quickly turns.

Also wasat means fairness. So whoever does not live fairly with family, neighbours, friends, associates, allies, and enemies has not actualized balance. Also it means the thing which is between highly advanced and poor. Neither good nor bad. Today in the West they say, "Not bad." Wasat, also, and this is the more important meaning, is implied for the best of all things, that which is between two undesirable extremes. What is in the middle is the peak. The balance between the undesirable over-spending and the undesirable stinginess I generosity. Between rashness and cowardice is courage. By this, measure things. Also for the Arabs, to say something is

in the middle means that it is in the centre. For example, the most precious gem in a chain is placed in the middle.

Lastly, the word *wusta* is used to mean the middle finger and if we contemplate Allah's wisdom in creation, you will find it the longest of all the fingers. Likewise, the people of the middle way will have the highest standing and the furthest reach in rectifying the word.

When you consider the variety of meanings this word possesses, you will find that one of essential traits for [the attainment of] balance is variety itself. Thus the word itself has many different meanings. The middle way, therefore, accepts differences and a variety of perspectives just as the word accepts many definitions. This is the word that describes our *ummah*.

The Origins of Balance in Islam

As for understanding the depth of this *wasatiyya* (balancedness), it is a great thing rooted in the fact that it originates from two things. The first is doctrine (*'aqīda*) and the second is the heart (*al-qalb*), which is the depository of certainty (*yaqīn*), in what a person believes and understands.

Part one: balance originates from our doctrine ('aqida)

As for doctrine, the first deviation in it occurred during the lifetime of the Prophet peace be upon him, and it happened before he left this world peace be upon him so that we could witness his stance and his utter refusal in it so that we can follow suit. It occurred when some people who fasted and prayed and even prayed the whole night and even sacrificed their lives in battle. But the flaw was their belief that only they were right, that they were the guardians of the next world and could judge who was right and who was wrong, to the point that Dhul Khuwaysira came to the Prophet peace be upon him when he was dividing something up and accused him, "This is an unfair division that was not done to please Allah. Fear Allah and be fair."

Thus, the first deviation from the middle way begins in matters of belief. The Khawarij would sit before Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ibn Abi Talib may Allah be pleased with him and ennoble his countenance and listen to 'the door of the city of knowledge,' the rightly guided caliph, the cousin of the Prophet peace be upon him. Then if they left the one would say to the other, "How knowledgeable is this little *kāfir*."

The heart of balance is in the doctrine. Our doctrine neither claims Allah's attributes to be all metaphoric, nor claims that Allah has a physical body (anthropomorphism). We are between exaggerating about the prophets and sufficing with only one prophet, for we believe in all the prophets. We are in the middle regarding our dealing with this world and the next world. Belief in the Afterlife does not stop us from working in this life, nor does any task in the world obstruct us from preparing

for the Afterlife. Our doctrine itself is based on balance. Regarding prophethood, we stand between those who killed prophets and those who made them gods.

Part two: its location is the heart (al-qalb)

The balance that we have is thus, rested upon certainty (yaqīn), which is in turn located in the locus of our heart. Such a balance is different than one based merely on an emotion or the membership of a group that shares a certain thought. The latter is unstable, but the former can never be shaken, because certainty (yaqīn) itself never quakes or wobbles.

Balance with us is based on something that can never be denied. If one denies it, they would no longer count as a Muslim. It is based on the Qur'an. Balance with us is not merely an idea that emerged among one of the generations, such that it would change and die out with the change and death of the generations. Whoever denies balance (wasat#iyya) would no longer count as a Muslim because [this concept] came from the Qur'an. This is the importance of knowing that balance starts in our 'aqīda.

Balance is therefore a necessity for the uprightness of a Muslim. We must believe by the doctrines taught in the Book of Allah that the ummah must be characterised by balance. Who denies this, is actually denying their entire Islam. This is the importance of connecting balance to 'aqīda.

Balance in Fighting Back Oppression

When a companion asked the Prophet peace be upon him and said, "Someone has transgressed against me and taken my rights." As an aside, defence against transgressors and occupiers is a duty in our law. It is important that the Muslims of Britain or anywhere in the West not be ashamed to say that our deen gives us the right and obliges us to fight back those who have transgressed and occupied our lands with the one condition that we do not transgress against those who have done no wrong.

We must know however that there is a point [of contention]. Resistance and fighting back is not an outlet for anger. But it is rather a worship with which we draw near to Allah, and it thus has rules that govern how we do it.

Regarding the Prophet peace be upon him was asked, "A man kills out of bravery, and another with anger, and another for fame, so which is the one who kills for the sake of Allah?" He said, "The one who fights so that the word of Allah is the highest." Thus the one who fights to show off bravery is not for Allah, nor the one who is merely angry at what happened to him, nor is the one who fights to be famous for his courage actually fighting for Allah's sake. But rather it is the one who fights, desiring that the word of Allah is most high. And it is therefore, inappropriate for one fighting for Allah to disobey Allah in the process [of his fighting].

Consider how the Companions praised one who fought hard and earnestly in the battle and then died, and they say, “May Paradise be prepared for him.” This is a man who put forth his soul between the hands of the Prophet peace be upon him. But the Prophet peace be upon him said, “And how do you know? For perhaps he is sinking into the pit of Hell over a garment he stole from the booty?” This man, the Companions said, sinks in the Fire after putting forth his soul easily in jihād with you, over a cheap garment he stole?” Yes, because the issue is about the principle of following the rules, being obedient to commands. Actions are not to be dictated by whims.

One of the Companions, in the saḥīḥ_ḥ hadith, asked the Prophet peace be upon him, “Is it acceptable for me to kill a man who fights me, then cuts off my hand, then runs behind a tree and declares his faith in Islam?” Consider that his desire for killing him is now anger and revenge from having his hand cut off and the pain it caused. The Prophet said, “No. If you kill him, your position is as his was when he fought you, and his position is as your was before killing him.”

This is our deen. It delves deeply into the purposes of our actions in our hearts. Because the issue is how we are interacting with Allah, Whose gaze is upon the hearts. Behaviour upon the middle path is the fruit of strong belief and certainty regarding the doctrine of balance. Then, this balanced behaviour will triumphantly emerge in circumstances that would otherwise destabilize a person. Such a one [with strong faith in this matter] can remain stable and preserve that balanced behaviour.

We have witnessed resistance in Europe, in the Arab lands, in the East, in the West, where people have made permissible all things with the justification that they are sacrificing. They have killed millions of people. How many people were killed in WWII in Europe? Why couldn't either side control themselves? Why was it difficult for many of them to stabilize their manners and morals? Because they are human. And human beings, if they are angered, cannot control themselves. For this we need balance. Not that it is merely an idea to discuss, but that it is deen which we believe and a certainty which is firmly implanted in the heart, such that if the anger that is from our humanity emerges, the strong faith and certainty that is in the heart also emerges to control it and dictate [our] reactions as is appropriate. This is the power of balance.

The Present Condition: Returning to Principled Behaviour

Now there is a question. Where is our balance today? It has [only] gone where our deen and certainty of faith has gone. And exactly when our bond with our 'aqida returns to a state of strength, and when the light of our faith becomes anchored in our hearts, this balance will burst forth in our life and interactions with creation.

We suffer from many problems today. We have rights taken from us, lands occupied, and in every news cast a many number of us are killed to the point that we are accustomed to seeing our own blood being shed. Some of us say, 'Look at this scene, a murder in Palestine or Iraq.' And the other will say, 'Oh I have saw that already, new pictures came out.'

Everyday, we witness our weakness among the nations. I speak to you and the turban on my very head which I wear to emulate the Beloved peace be upon him was imported into my country but manufactured outside the Muslim world. The food we eat is grown elsewhere despite that in my land we have many plantations that can produce crops. I speak to you, and in everything [we use], from the needle to the plane, we are dependent upon other nations. This is a problem that we are suffering from today, even though our deen seeks to make us independent and sufficing for ourselves.

I ask myself when I come here, 'How many of the Muslim youth in Britain are living on benefits, whilst they are young men and capable of gaining a livelihood by the halal means?' Today, how many of us lie so as to gain more credit with the benefit system.

And yet, we all have excuses. How many of us say, 'This is our rightful wealth which they stole during the colonial days.' And some of us say, 'They are just infidels and the wealth of an infidel is halal.' And some say, 'I am from Somalia; they have destroyed my country.' Another says, 'I am from Kosovo; they stood by watching my people get slaughtered and did nothing.' And on and on and on. The excuses are many. But I have one question. In our belief, is lying halal? Are we allowed to lie? [Allah says] "Verily those who say lies are those who do not believe." Verily Allah speaks the truth.

It is my right to say, whilst I am here in Britain, that the role the government played in the Iraq war was a crime. But does that justify the killing of innocent people here? I know and you know that London is the only city in which over one million people took to the streets protesting the Iraq war.

At one point in history, the Muslims were attacked in a certain part of China. Fighting broke out and eventually, the Muslims managed to besiege the enemy city. After weeks of the siege, in which the enemy was forced to surrender, they wrote a letter to the Muslims, saying, "Your faith obliges you to make an offer of three things before fighting. Either to pay the jizya, or to become Muslim, or to fight. But you fought without offering any of this. Therefore, you should retreat." The case was raised to a Muslim judge, and he judged, that despite the toil and difficulty they went through and even though victory was at hand, it was not done correctly and the Muslim army must go back. Because we are a people of principle.

In the time of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, an army was sent out and it besieged the fortress of the Franks who had transgressed against the Muslims. At the most tense moments of the siege, and while there was amongst the Muslim ranks a Frank who had become Muslim (he was of the clients (mawālī): an enemy soldier, who was captured, then became Muslim and freed). The Franks, from their side began addressing this man in their own language. So he took a piece of parchment, wrote on something on it and shot it into the Franks' fortress. Suddenly, the fortress door opened and some men began walking out unarmed. This was because the Frankish Muslim had written them a note of security, as in Islam, any Muslim may write a security note for any non-Muslim even an enemy, so long as they do not have a history of treachery. All Muslims must give that person security, regardless of who wrote it.

The Muslims did not know what to do. They had exhausted themselves in the siege and now one of them who was not long ago a non-Muslim has given them full amnesty. They wrote to 'Umar and he replied, "The Muslims are one. And the promise of the smallest of them must be abided by all of them. The army should return."

This discipline to principle was the cause of our strength. Some may think, 'If we follow [principles] like this, given our circumstances now, we will appear weak and it will worsen our scenario.' Such a one is told, 'Verily, the principled behaviour is the secret of the ummah's strength, to which it is now high time to return.'

The admiration of these chivalrous actions and sublime principles is in the natural predisposition of all people, Muslim and not. Who of us does not admire the behaviour of Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi, when we read about him, may Allah have mercy on him, that he sent his own personal doctor to tend to Richard the Lion Heart who came to occupy the Land and fought him face to face. But when Richard the Lion Heart fell ill, Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi sent his own doctor to see him. Who of us does not admire this? Do we not stand proud of this act coming from one of our leaders?

Do you not feel pride by a Muslim who was so strong? He liberated Jerusalem, and then acted this way with the enemy leader. You have pride no doubt. The question is, when it is time for me to do the same, will I do it, or will I retreat, considering this a weakness? This is the difference between those whom Allah helps and gives His support and those whom He leaves to themselves.

Pre-requisites of Attaining Balance: Knowledge and Discipline

All this is why we need balance. Balance is easy to talk about but its implementation is something else. Going to extremes [on the other hand] is easy. Those who go to extremes can be ignorant; they do not have to maintain high standards of morals and character. Such a one is not required to restrain himself at times of anger, nor are they asked to submit their whims to principles. But rather, they submit themselves to their whims.

Balance on the other hand, requires knowledge, of which we are today in need. Balance also requires struggling against the nafs. Balance requires us to leave off something we might like and do something we might find burdensome. Because balance has an exemplar. He is our master Muhammad peace and blessings be upon him, his family, and friends.

In conclusion, we would like all those present to pick up their pens and write. We need our youth to take to the road of knowledge, to understand our religion as it should be understood, connected to a sound chain of transmission in knowledge and upbringing, in self purification, transmission, and understanding. We must understand our deen. We cannot just take our religion from satellite [TV] programs or newspapers, nor by gathering of youth sitting together, none of whom have sought to learn. Upon leaving seek a path to proper knowledge. We are in dire need to learn our deen. Along with knowledge, we need the pure intention, to learn for only Allah, not for fame or to be seen or heard.

We said that we are an ummah with many rights taken away from us. But we are also people with many responsibilities. Seek knowledge about your responsibilities before your rights. If you are a man, open the books and ask, 'What is my duty towards my wife?' If you are a woman, what duties do you have towards your husband? And you are a son, what do you have towards your mother? And you are a father, what duties do you have towards your daughter? You are a neighbour, what are the rights of your neighbour, Muslim or not? You are an associate in business. What do you owe your fellow associates? You are a member of a country. What rights does your country have upon you? You are a member of an ummah; what is the ummah's right upon you? You are a human being; what is the right of humanity upon you? You are the regent of Allah on earth; what are the rights of His creation upon you? We begin with our responsibilities and act upon them. The one who looks to his rights first is one who does not want to act; he wants to take from others only. He does not want to give.

A Message to the Sisters

We need the Muslim woman to fulfil her role in her society. The society which does not allot the opportunity for the woman to do her part does not produce a stable environment for living. Muslim women, regardless of your circumstance, you have a mission.

If you are young, you inherit the position of A'isha, for she was quite young when she married the Messenger of Allah peace be upon him. If you are widow, you are our mother, as was Sawda who was a widow when she married the Prophet peace be upon him. If you are very old, so you are our mother, as Umm Salama was. If you are divorced, you are our mother: Hafsa. And if you were not a Muslim before and were Christian, you too are our mother: Māriyya. If you were Jewish and became Muslim, you are our mother: Safiyya. If you are a rich business woman, then you are our mother: Khadija. If you are a generous woman, you are or mother Zaynab.

In any circumstance you are in, the Prophet of Allah peace be upon him taught us to respect you because he took on wives of a great variety of difference, not for pleasure, or else he would have taken the most beautiful ones, but he was permitted to take this large number so that we can be taught that regardless of a woman's circumstance, it is not permitted for her to be looked down upon, nor deprived of her rights, and that any degrading look towards a woman for any circumstance she is in childhood, old age, divorce is a degrading look to a wife of the Prophet peace and blessings be upon him.

When we discuss your role, we need it to be in accordance to this sublime middle way. Do not surrender yourselves to injustice. As men, we must acknowledge injustices in our homes done in the name of Islam, and Islam is innocent of them. But neither should we push them to what is termed 'liberation,' but is in reality depriving them of every sublime quality they could possess. It makes them a piece of merchandise that is marketed to sell a car or otherwise.

Conclusion

To finish, do not be afraid in this country. You are a part of it. Feel that you have a responsibility towards improving it and remedying its ailments. Be open about your attendance at masjid and take an active part in the Muslim community. If you see good, follow it through, and if you see wrong, be the first to reject it. If someone wants to do harm to the country in the name of Islam, we are the first to reject him. If you find a shortcoming in yourself, then stand in the middle of the night, offering two rakaahs, weeping before Allah. Then you shall see the outpouring of His Divine Aid, empowering you to overcome yourself. By this, you will truly see wonders.

[dua]

Translated by Shadee Elmasry. Edited by Amina Nawaz.



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Habib 'Ali Zain Al Abideen Al Jifri was born into a family of noble lineage extending in an unbroken chain to Imam Husayn (ra), the grandson of the Prophet (saw). Habib 'Ali is from the majestic city of Tarim, South Yemen. Nestled in the ancient valley of Hadramawt, Tarim has been a center of learning and spirituality for centuries. Habib 'Ali received a classical Islamic education from the illustrious scholars of Hadramawt, embodying a methodology which crystallizes the middle way of Islam, Islamic Jurisprudence, a respect for the differences between jurists and a spiritual education drawn from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Habib 'Ali is Founder of the 'Taba Foundation for Islamic Studies and Research' based in the United Arab Emirates. He is also a lecturer at Dar Al Mustafa, Tarim, an educational institute established for the study of traditional Islamic sciences. Habib 'Ali is continually invited to lecture in many countries across the globe and appears regularly on a variety network television and radio programs.

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